

Legacy

Volume 15 | Issue 1

Article 4

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Olivia Partlow

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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Recommended Citation

Partlow, Olivia () "The Abduction of Japanese Latin Americans during World War II," *Legacy*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/legacy/vol15/iss1/4>

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Olivia Partlow

The Abduction of Japanese Latin Americans during World War II

The United States has a reputation for being prejudiced towards new groups of immigrants. In the past we saw that when non-English, Catholics, people of Asian descent and other groups began immigrating in large numbers. Today we see it with the large influx of Hispanic immigrants. From the 1920s through 1940s this prejudice was directed at Japanese immigrants. There were laws in place that prevented Japanese immigrants from becoming citizens. The United States was not the only country to have laws against Japanese nationals. Several Latin American countries had similar laws. Peru had a very large population of Japanese immigrants and in turn had the most prejudice. The United States took this prejudice to the next level by interning people of Japanese ancestry residing on both United States and Latin American soil. The United States was able to intern Axis nationals from Latin American countries by using outdated laws and finding loopholes in current ones.

When World War II broke out in Europe, the United States began planning for the internment of its Japanese population. The United States also enlisted several Latin American countries to arrest their people of Japanese as well as German and Italian descent and bring them to America to be interned. The United States planned the internment even though the Munson Report found that Japanese Americans were very patriotic and eager to show their support of America. Curtis B. Munson, a private citizen, was hired by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) to lead an investigation of the loyalty of Japanese Americans that resulted in the Munson Report.¹ Munson recommended that internment was unnecessary, but that recommendation did not stop FDR from ordering it.² The United States planned to

exchange the Japanese Latin Americans with Allied soldiers being held by Axis countries.³

The Alien Enemies Act of 1798 gave FDR the power to intern “alien enemies.” The original Alien Enemies Act of 1798 was created by a Federalist controlled congress as an attempt to quiet the Democratic-Republican opposition as well as protecting against possible French sympathizers during a time when a war with France seemed imminent.⁴ During World War II this law was abused by FDR. The Latin American countries cooperating in the kidnapping and deportation of Axis nationals arrested and confiscated the passports of these people. Once they were deported to the United States, the United States government used the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 as a way to legally hold the poor deportees because they could not provide their passports.⁵ Although the Alien Enemies Act was outdated in 1941, that was not the first time it was abused in the twentieth century.

During World War I the United States interned Germans and German Americans suspected in sabotage and did so using the Alien Enemies Act. The internment during World War I served as a precedent for the large-scale internment of Japanese nationals during World War II. The United States worked with several Latin American countries, especially Panama and Cuba, who collaborated by interning Germans living on their soils.⁶ Latin American countries cooperated with the war and internment efforts because they were within the United States’ sphere of influence and many of their economies depended on continued support from the United States. This carried through to World War II. The Charge in Bolivia wrote to Secretary of State Cordell Hull about their support of the United States and added, “Public opinion is mostly with us on our feeling, is superficial and based largely on the fact of Bolivian economic dependence on the United States.”⁷ The efforts made by the Latin American countries during World War I made the United States confident of continued cooperation during the time leading up to and during World War II.

The Eighth International Conference of American States held in Lima, Peru in 1938 discussed the possible attack on a

neutral American country. This conference took place three years before the attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States' entrance into World War II. The foreign ministers of the American States attended it and decided that the member states would consult each other if there were to be a threat to a neutral American country. Also concluded at Lima was that enemy aliens would be subject to the authority of the country in which they reside.⁸ Although this was before war broke out in Europe, the decisions made in 1938 laid the foundation for the wartime policies of the United States and the Latin American countries toward their residents of Japanese ancestry.

The following year, with the outbreak of war in Europe, all twenty-one foreign ministers of the American states met in Panama to discuss their previous conferences on American neutrality. The Inter-American Neutrality Committee was established at this time. The purpose of this committee was to provide legal advice to the states in the region so that they could stay out of world conflicts. The committee would later go on to set up the guidelines for internment.⁹ Also during the meeting in Panama, a security zone was set up around the American continent. The security zone was created so that warships could not come close to American soil. Axis ships that entered the security zone would be subject to search.¹⁰

While Latin American states prepared to stay neutral during the war, the FBI, under President Roosevelt's orders, began collecting intelligence on Axis nationals both in the United States and in Latin America beginning in 1939. The United States set up agencies throughout Latin America to monitor Japanese, Germans, and Italians that could become security threats. During this time the FBI concentrated mostly on those Axis nationals that posed a threat. However, after the attack on Pearl Harbor the qualifications of a subversive quickly changed to include all those of Japanese ancestry and those of German or Italian ancestry who were suspected of fifth column activity. The United States was able to convince several Latin American countries and territories, namely Peru and Panama, to collect intelligence on their people as well.¹¹

Foreign ministers met again at Havana, Cuba in 1940 to discuss the continued neutrality, but also the possibilities of action in the event of a non-American country's hostility towards an American country. The declaration following the meeting stated, "That any attempt on the part of a non-American state against the integrity or inviolability of the territory, the sovereignty or the political independence of an American state shall be considered as an act of aggression against the states which sign this declaration."¹² It was this declaration that led most American states to declare war on Japan following the Pearl Harbor bombing.

The Inter-American Neutrality committee, created at the 1939 meeting of Foreign Ministers at Lima, met in 1940. At this meeting the Committee outlined internment as follows:

The neutral State will intern in its territory, until the termination of the war, all individuals belonging to the land, sea or air forces of the belligerents, who individually or collectively enter its territory, as well as all officers and crews of warships, military airplanes and ships considered auxiliary vessels of war, in all cases in which the interning of the said ships and airplanes is appropriate.¹³

It is this meeting that established how the internment process would take place. At this time it was understood that each country would intern its population on its own soil, with the United States footing the bill, but that was soon changed because it became too costly. The plan was later modified so that the United States would house all the internees.

A month and a half before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Ambassador to Panama, Edwin C. Wilson negotiated Panamanian internment. According to this agreement, as soon as the United States acted, Panama would arrest and intern Japanese individuals on Panamanian soil. Panamanian guards would guard internees on Tobago Island, with the United States paying all

costs. The United States would also take any and all blame against negative claims, should they arise.¹⁴ The United States was very concerned with the Axis nationals living in Panama because of the security risk of the Panama Canal. Both the United States and the Panamanian governments believed that the Panama Canal could be a target.

On December 7, 1941, the Imperial Army of Japan attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor. Immediately after the attack Latin American countries began writing to FDR and Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Almost every country in the Americas declared war on Japan following the United States, in accordance with the decisions made at the 1940 Havana Conference. Most Latin American states declared their support for the United States in the days following the attack.

On December 8, the Chargé in Mexico, McGurk, wrote to Hull and assured him that, "according to our informant all Japanese subjects will be interned and the Japanese Minister will be handed his passports."¹⁵ Mexico was different from the other Latin American countries because it chose to intern its Japanese subjects on its own soil instead of in the United States. Also on December 8, the United States ambassador to Panama, Wilson, sent a telegram to Hull notifying him that the internment of Japanese nationals around the Panama Canal as well as censorship of radio and other communications had already begun.¹⁶ Panama was the first to cut diplomatic relations with Japan, declare war and begin to intern Axis nationals. As a United States territory that held the Panama Canal, Panama was vital to the United States' internment policy.

Many countries arrested and detained Axis nationals but it was not until a Conference of Foreign Ministers of the American Republics at Rio de Janeiro in January 1942, that it was decided that the enemy aliens would be sent to the United States for internment. This decision was made because the cost would be too high for the United States to set up internment camps throughout Latin America rather than internment in a concentrated area in the United States.¹⁷ Plans for internment within the United States made it easier for the United States diplomats to convince the

Latin American states to participate in internment. Also decided at the Rio de Janeiro conference was that the United States would provide security to the hemisphere by moving troops into Latin America as well as providing financial support through Lend Lease programs.¹⁸

Ecuador required convincing to begin interning its alien enemies. In a telegram to Cordell Hull, Minister Long conveyed Ecuador's concerns regarding internment plans:

The President and Foreign Minister asked me to join them this afternoon and indicated they were exploring future possibilities. There are in Ecuador about 25 Japanese plus and active *chargé d'Affaires*. If Ecuador should declare war or even take some lesser step that might involve the Japanese in a concentration camp it is their feeling that Japan might endeavor to seize the Galápagos as a base which Ecuador is unable to prevent. Thus with the intention of helping us by interning the Japanese Ecuador might actually furnish Japan a pretext to seize the Galápagos. Is there anything that I can suggest in this connection?¹⁹

On December 10th Hull responded to Long letting him know that the United States did not believe the Galápagos were in danger whatsoever while stressing the importance of internment.²⁰ A day earlier, the Undersecretary of State, Welles, sent out a memorandum of his correspondence with the Ecuadorian government. Ecuador would be open to complying with all its inter-American agreements if an agreement of protection could be reached with the United States.²¹ Following this agreement Ecuador arrested its Japanese residents and sent them to the United States to be interned.

Peru followed a rather different course of action than Ecuador in dealing with its population of Japanese descent. There had been anti-Japanese sentiment in Peru ever since a large influx of Japanese immigrants began arriving during the earlier half of the nineteenth century.²² Peru also had anti-Japanese laws before

the internment process began and had cut off immigration from Japan in 1936.²³ Peru saw the United States proposition as an easy way to rid itself of its Japanese population, the largest in all of Latin America. Eighty percent of all Latin American internees came from Peru. In 1942 undersecretary Welles estimated 1,053 out of 1,747 total would come from Peru.²⁴ Peru also received a \$29 million Lend Lease for their collaboration during the war.²⁵ Officials in Peru had already decided to break diplomatic relations, declare war on Japan, and intern its Japanese population immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor. This was fueled mostly from anti-Japanese resentment due to their success in business and the cotton industry in Peru.²⁶

The United States and the Latin American countries involved used deceitful practices to “legally” hold Axis nationals in the United States. Once arrested and detained in their countries of residence, the enemy aliens had their passports seized. Then they were loaded onto ships to be brought to the United States. The first shipment of 325 enemy nationals came aboard the *Etolin* on April 5, 1942. 141 of the deportees were Peruvian Japanese, the others of German and Italian decent. Of the 141 Japanese detained, there was not one that had an arrest record and only seven were on the Proclaimed List of Certain Blocked Nationals.²⁷ In the months and years following the first shipment, many women and children were either forcibly or voluntarily (in order to reunite with family members) interned. Once the deportees arrived in the United States, officials would ask for their passports and when no one was able to produce them, they were taken to camps to be interned.

Most internment camps for Japanese Latin Americans were located in Texas in places that previously housed Civilian Conservation Core (CCC) camps or other similar structures. The Kennedy camp in Kennedy, Texas housed the first internees from the *Etolin*. Like other camps, barbed wire fences and guard towers surrounded the Kennedy Camp. Internees were forced to do a daily line-up when a siren sounded at 9 A.M. Military personnel also heavily guarded them. During an inspection of the camp it was found out that the internees were refused ice water during

the scorching summer when temperatures rose to 100° F. After this startling inspection a new director was placed in charge of the camp.²⁸

Unlike the many Japanese Americans that were sent to internment camps, many of the Japanese Latin Americans were deported back to Japan in exchange for Allied nationals in Axis controlled countries. The first trade happened in the spring of 1942 and mostly consisted of Japanese officials in exchange for United States officials.²⁹ Most internees wished to return to Japan once they arrived in the United States. Some were forcibly deported back to Japan as part of an exchange and many voluntarily repatriated after the war was over.³⁰ In a 1945 Presidential Proclamation, Harry S. Truman ordered, all alien enemies be “[removed] to destinations outside the limits of the Western Hemisphere in territory of the enemy governments to which or to the principles of which they have adhered.”³¹ This forced many Japanese Latin Americans to return to Japan. Once the war and internment was over, Peru refused to let Japanese Peruvians return. These Peruvians either stayed in the United States or returned to Japan upon the termination of internment.

Decades after internment, Japanese Americans sought redress for the atrocities committed against them during World War II. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 apologized to Japanese Americans who had been interned and offered \$20,000 to “eligible individuals.”³² Japanese Latin Americans were not considered eligible. Frustrated by the injustice, four Japanese Latin Americans brought a class action lawsuit against the United States. The United States settled and allotted \$5,000 for each survivor and President Bill Clinton offered a public apology.³³ The United States argued that the Japanese Latin Americans were not eligible for the full redress because they were technically illegal aliens.

The United States Government abusing its power as a world leader as well as abusing its very own laws rendered the internment of Japanese Latin Americans possible. The United States blatantly disregarded reports, such as the one from Curtis Munson, that there was no need for internment. Most of the Japanese Latin Americans that were interned had never been in

trouble with the law and were selected because of the anti-Japanese sentiment in their region. Besides acting on prejudices, the United States used outdated laws to justify the kidnapping of roughly 2500 people. Rather than acting as a response to the attack on Pearl Harbor, preparations for the internment of Japanese started well before December of 1941. Some laws and agreements used to justify it were concluded before the war even began in Europe. This was an outrageous abuse of power that unfortunately went unchecked for years and to this day has not been fully discussed.

Notes

¹ Lon Kurashige, "Expanding the story of Japanese American internment," *Critical Asian Studies* 35, no. 4 (December 2003): 634.

² Michi Weglyn, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps* (New York: Morrow, 1976), 34.

³ "Japanese Latin Americans," in *Encyclopedia of Japanese American Internment*, ed. Gary Okihiro (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2013). 87.

⁴ Kelli Nakamura, "Alien Enemies Act of 1798," in *Densho Encyclopedia*.

⁵ Weglyn, *Years of Infamy*, 64.

⁶ Thomas Adam, ed., *Transatlantic relations series. Germany and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History: a Multidisciplinary Encyclopedia*. Vol. II (2005), 182.

⁷ "United States-Latin American Relations 1889-1939," *Congressional Digest* (December 1940): 302.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Inter-American Neutrality Committee," *The American Journal of International Law* 34, no. 2 (April 1940): 75-82.

¹⁰ I Meeting at Panama, September 23 - October 3, 1939.

¹¹ Thomas Connel, *America's Japanese Hostages: The World War II Plan for a Japanese Free Latin America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), 60.

¹² "Havana Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the American Republics, July 21-30, 1940," *A Decade of American Foreign Policy 1941-1949*, January 1, 2008.

¹³ "Inter-American Neutrality Committee," 76.

¹⁴ United States Department of State, *Foreign relations of the United States diplomatic papers 1936*, 106.

¹⁵ United States Department of State, *Foreign relations of the United States diplomatic papers 1936*, 100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁷ "Japanese Latin Americans," 87.

¹⁸ Connel, *America's Japanese Hostages*, 60.

¹⁹ United States Department of State, *Foreign relations of the United States diplomatic papers 1936*, 89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

²¹ United States Department of State, *Foreign relations of the United States diplomatic papers 1936*. 90.

²² Weglyn, *Years of Infamy*. 60.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Welles to American Embassy, Lima, March 31, 1942, EW 1939

²⁵ Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, to Peruvian Minister of Finance and Commerce, David Dasso, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1942 vol. 6, 669.

²⁶ Connel, *America's Japanese Hostages*, 66.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁰ Weglyn, *Years of Infamy*, 64.

³¹ Proclamation No. 2662, 3 C.R.F (8 September 1945).

³² S. 1001, 100th Cong. (1987).

³³ United States Department of Justice Press Release, (1998). *Japanese Latin Americans to receive compensation for internment during World War II*.